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By Karen Hosler

State Senator Edward T. Conroy, a decorated veteran of the Korean war who spent 20 years in the rough-and-tumble politics of Prince Georges county, died of cancer last night at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington. He was 53.

The four-term Bowie Democrat, who entered Walter Reed about two months ago, had an inoperable abdominal cancer, according to a spokesman for the family.

The senator's wife, Mary, and their two sons—Edward, Jr., 27, and Kevin, 20—were at the hospital when he died about 8:30 p.m., the spokesman said.

"The state of Maryland is really going to suffer a loss," said Senator Norman R. Stone (D, Baltimore county), who described Mr. Conroy as his "closest friend in the legislature for the past 20 years."

"He was working on legislative business until last week," Mr. Stone

added. "When I went to see him in the hospital two weeks ago, all he was worried about was my campaign. That's the kind of guy he was."

Senator Conroy's death came as friends and supporters were planning a June 30 testimonial in his honor at Martin's West in Baltimore county.

The event was being organized to help retire the \$75,000 in campaign debts left from an unsuccessful race for Congress last year and Mr. Conroy's losing bid as the Democratic nominee for the U.S. Senate in 1980.

A bipartisan gathering including Governor Hughes, Senators Paul S. Sarbanes and Charles McC. Mathias, Jr., and political friends and foes from over the years was expected at the \$50-a-person tribute.

The serious nature of the senator's illness, which came on very suddenly last December, was quickly apparent to his legislative colleagues because of the critical business he was forced to miss during this year's General Assembly session.

As the firm and feisty chairman of the Senate Constitutional and Public Law committee, Senator Conroy presided at the beginning of the session over hearings on two of the most important issues ever to come before his committee: reapportionment and mandatory automobile emissions inspections.

But when the General Assembly reapportionment map hit the Senate floor and his Prince Georges colleagues began a lengthy filibuster, Senator Conroy was in the hospital for tests.

During that short stay, Mr. Conroy, who won a Silver Star for courage in combat and two Purple Hearts for war injuries that cost him his left arm, learned the gravity of his condition but returned to the Senate anyway in hopes of completing the session.

His fiery nature, shown through the years in numerous crusades—usually for veterans' benefits or labor rights—was gone, however. He was back in the hospital more than two weeks before the session adjourned.

"He really had a lot of grit," Senate President James Clark, Jr. (D, Howard) said last night. "Of course, he showed that before—in the service and in his political career."

Though Mr. Conroy was never successful in reaching higher office—he made two tries at the Fifth District congressional seat in addition to the U.S. Senate race against Mr. Mathias—he had an apparently unbreakable hold on voters in his hometown of Bowie, who kept reelecting him to the state Senate.

He was among the original group of politicians who came together in 1970 to form what would later be called the Prince Georges county Democratic machine under the leadership of current U.S. Representative Steny H. Hoyer, and his behind-the-scenes sidekick, Peter F. O'Malley.

Mr. Conroy's association with Mr. Hoyer, who became Senate president in 1975, won him the chairmanship of the Constitutional and Public Law Committee that Mr. Hoyer created specifically for him.

Ironically, it was Mr. Hoyer who defeated Senator Conroy in his last bid for elected office—the special Fifth District congressional race last year.

Though Mr. Conroy attracted his share of critics, including several political rivals who coveted his seat, his illness brought into sharp focus the affection that colleagues on both sides of the aisle held for a man who gave the Senate a good bit of its color.

"He was a consummate politician—he was always on," recalled former Senator Peter A. Bozick (D, Prince Georges).

A native of New York state, he earned his bachelor's degree at Fordham University in 1951 and his law degree from Georgetown University in Washington in 1956. He was admitted to the Maryland bar in 1957.

Before his election to the state Senate, he served one term in the House of Delegates from 1963 to 1967.

Funeral arrangements were incomplete last night.